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ABSTRACT

By means of a humorous description of a series of meetings between a college provost and several faculty and staff members, this article illustrates the difficulties of determining what a university's highest priority should be, in the light of different and conflicting opinions and interests among the faculty. (KM)

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THE PROVOST'S NUMBER ONE PRIORITY

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by Eugene Arden

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> "Affirmative Action must become not merely an idea that you approve of, but rather it must become the NUMBER ONE PRIORITY on this campus."

The Affirmative Action Coordinator of the campus arrived at the Provost's Office breathless and a few minutes late for her 10 a.m. appointment. She explained that a committee meeting had lasted longer than expected, but the Provost hardly listened. The extra time had allowed him to complete a memo on why final exams must be given by the faculty during final exam week, rather than during the last class week of the semester—how does one say the obvious without being obvious, or pompous?

"You don't really mind if I smoke?" she asked while lighting up and nodding at the *Thank You for Not Smoking* sign on the Provost's desk.

"I'd like you to feel comfortable," he answered.

"Well," she said, exhaling a twin stream through her nostrils, "it's important that we understand each other. I know that you are sympathetic to the Affirmative Action program, so I won't waste time trying to win you over as if you were some kind of dinosaur, okay?"

He nodded vaguely but felt a rush of satisfaction. They knew how he felt. *They*—even the Affirmative Action Coordinator, who might have wondered about his sincerity—had *heard* him when he pleaded the cause of increased access for minority students; they understood what he was doing when he held out for a woman to head a department in the liberal arts college.

She started The Speech: "What's the use of having faculty goals if we never meet them? We have entire departments without a single black faculty member. I know—the handful of black physicists are gobbled up by places like MIT or Stanford, or the government or industry. But we don't have a black economist either. What the heck, we don't even have a female economist. You are the only one with the leverage, and the budget, to tell the econ people that they *have* to appoint a black or a woman—or they can't appoint *anyone* to fill their vacancy. Also, if it means adding three or four thousand dollars to the salary line, you're the one to supply the green stuff. Why would you do that? Let me tell you why. Because Affirmative Action must become not merely an idea that you approve of, but rather it must become the NUMBER ONE PRIORITY on this campus. Otherwise we will be looking at the same dismal numbers, the same failed effort, a year from now or five years from now."

She was right. She had complimented him on his good intentions, but she was justified in laying a guilt trip on him for letting years go by without changing the complexion of the faculty. He winced at the expression and wondered what he could have thought of instead of "complexion."

Mercifully, the secretary reminded him that he was due at the Computing Center in just five minutes. After acknowledging that he had a special responsibility and that, yes, he would *require* the econ search committee to come up with some minority candidates, or at least a qualified woman, the Provost headed for the Computer Center.

HE 020 856

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> "You would see the whole thing differently if you would start with the conviction that computerizing the campus is our absolute NUMBER ONE PRIORITY."

It was not yet the busiest time of the day for the Computing Center, but already there were students standing in line for everything—access to the micros, to the manuals, to the counselors, even for table space at which to check their programs. The Provost had agreed to fund extra hours for the Center, to 2 a.m. rather than closing at midnight, hoping that some of the "hackers" would stay away until the late evening hours. The strategy had worked for a brief while, but the crowding soon began again as more and more courses included computer applications.

He met with the Director and with the Chairman of the Faculty Committee on Computing. Yes, he acknowledged to the Director, more space was needed, additional micros had to be installed, another counselor would help provide better service, and "someone" would have to pick up the recent increase in telephone charges. Where would the extra space and dollars come from? Well, the Provost did not really know; he certainly did not know where he could find more space, but at least he still had a bit of money left in the discretionary account, and if enrollment increased again in the next term, he could claim some more of the tuition income. He could even authorize the Director to over-spend this year and gamble on being able to make up the deficit next year.

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But that was the easy part. Juggling the budget was what the Provost had been doing for a long time, favoring the library and chemistry one year, the admissions office and electrical engineering the next year, and so on around the campus, depending on which fires had to be put out at what particular moment. It was an art, if not a science.

Now, however, the problem was greater than merely patching cracks and keeping the ship afloat. "What we need desperately," said the faculty Chairman to the Provost, "is a sense of history and a real vision about the future." The implication that he lacked a sense of history or a vision of the future did not immediately bother the Provost. It was the word "desperately" that alarmed him, for it meant that in the ensuing discussion, no solution would be considered too bizarre, and no proposal could be ruled out, regardless of the consequences.

"It depends on where you're coming from," said the Chairman. "If all you want to do is to keep the status quo, you'll find a partial solution . . . that is, you'll nickel and dime your way through to what will satisfy you for the moment. But you would see the whole thing differently, and much more clearly, if you would start with the conviction that computerizing the campus is our absolute NUMBER ONE PRIORITY."

"Computerize the campus?" The Provost really did not have to ask,

> "I don't think we have any choice: new faculty lines have to be our NUMBER ONE PRIORITY."

but the question gave him a moment to prepare for the inevitable elaboration on why computer power had to precede all other needs on the campus.

"We add a few work stations here and a few work stations there," the Faculty Chairman declared, "and we upgrade the minis every few years. But all we are doing is running to stay even—we don't get ahead. Computers are revolutionizing life all around us. Hospitals, banks, factories, even the IRS, for crying out loud, all function differently from the way they ever did before. What we need to do is not merely catch up; instead we have got to make a great leap forward. We've got to prepare students for ten or twenty years from now, not just for the year they graduate. Unless we tie the way the whole campus functions to computers, nothing else we do will matter. And don't tell me how much it costs! The costliest thing we can do is *not* succeed in our Number One priority."

The Provost granted that, despite the hyperboles, the man was, alas, essentially right. Our number one priority should be computers. But *was* it really our Number One priority? Could he force it on the campus?

The Provost stole a brief glance at his wristwatch, not to be rude, but just in order to signal that he would be moving on in a few minutes. "You know," he began tentatively, "your main problem is not with me, but with your fellow faculty members. The Faculty Council yesterday had its regular end-of-term meeting with the President and me, and for at least half the afternoon what we heard again and again was that more

faculty office space is needed, and that even the existing space needs to be upgraded. The faculty offices are so small that they are referred to as *deprivation chambers*. So we agreed—it's in the minutes—that our number one priority next year would be the improvement of faculty office space. Now, I have to tell you, Larry, that I can argue in favor of more money for computers, but if I go too far in that direction, the Faculty Council will remind me of yesterday's meeting."

It took another ten minutes to break away, for some assurances had at last to be exchanged. Maybe the Provost could not do everything that was needed, but he implied that he understood the urgency and the need for an understanding of "the big picture." He actually shook hands with the Director and the Chairman, as if he were leaving on a voyage, though he was actually only going to the next building, for a lunch date with the Dean of Arts and Sciences.

As soon as the waitress took their orders and was out of earshot, the Dean declared, "We're not going to be able to get away with it forever, you know."

The Provost immediately thought of at least a half-dozen things that he *did* hope to get away with for a long time to come, but he was at a loss to know which one the Dean meant. He soon found out.

"We've been bragging for years," the Dean started, "that we really pay attention to our undergraduates. We're not like the big state universities, where freshmen and sophomores are taught mainly by T.A.'s. Here all professors teach a lower division course every term. That's great, but the crew of adjuncts has grown each year. Now a third of our undergrad courses are taught by adjuncts, and in some departments it's over 40%. We're faking our main marketing claim, and if it ever goes public, the enrollment will suffer—and we'll be up the creek. The only sensible solution is to get some more full-time faculty appointed, no matter what else needs to be sacrificed. I don't think we have any choice: new faculty lines have to be our NUMBER ONE PRIORITY."

> **"How many people must we lose before you stop fiddling around and make salaries our NUMBER ONE PRIORITY?"**

How could he argue? The School of Business would have to reduce its proportion of adjuncts to 25%, or it could not even be considered for accreditation by the American Association of Collegiate Schools of Business. The academic departments would hardly sit still for Business to get extra faculty lines because of pressure from an external agency, while adjuncts in other units continued to teach 35-40% of their undergraduate courses.

The Dean was right. Sooner or later, probably sooner than later, the Provost was going to have to allocate new lines. But how? As enrollments had increased in the past few years, especially of adult students taking night courses, promises had been made for more staff-counselors who specialize in helping non-traditional students, an extra recruiter in the Admissions Office, clerks to make it possible for the Registrar and Bursar to keep their offices open four evenings a week, another reference librarian—the list was endless. How much of that could he delay if new faculty lines were to become the Number One priority?

"Well," the Provost said, "if I just hold off some of my plans in other areas . . ."

"Cut wherever you want," the Dean interrupted, "except in the library book budget. With all the money we have been spending on science hardware, the Humanities people are crawling all over me. They say that if we don't do something about books as a top priority, they are going to quit assigning research papers. In fact . . ." They were startled at that moment by the Chairman of the Electrical Engineering Department, who scraped a nearby chair over to their table and glowered at them in obvious anger.

"Hi, Fred . . ." the Provost began.

"Don't 'Hi Fred' me," the Chairman snapped. "When I lost two valuable people last year, I warned you that our salaries were not good enough to keep faculty here, especially the ones in hot fields. You gave us a few token increases which didn't meet the market competition, and now I've lost Harry. He just told me that he is accepting an offer from State, at five thousand more than we're paying him. How am I supposed to run a department if I lose three of my best people in two years? Will you tell me that? What kind of department am I going to be left with? And what makes you think it won't happen again next year and the year after that? How many people must we lose before you stop fiddling around and make salaries our NUMBER ONE PRIORITY?"

By now the Chairman's face was red and his voice was loud enough to be heard at the adjoining tables. The Provost murmured, "Fred, come by my office later this afternoon. Maybe we can work something out. Harry's wife has a good job in town, and she can't be happy about moving. At the moment our Number One priority is to put together a package that will keep Harry here, but without bending everyone else's nose out of shape."

The Provost popped an antacid into his mouth as he strolled back toward his office. He did not particularly like Fundraising Committee meetings, but somehow the one next on his schedule seemed okay. With some luck, it might last several hours. ■